

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 838

PS 027 104

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TITLE Parents in Poverty Provide Positive Influences for Their Children: A Selected Literature Review.  
PUB DATE 1999-01-00  
NOTE 27p.  
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; At Risk Persons; \*Economically Disadvantaged; Family School Relationship; Intervention; Low Income Groups; Minority Groups; \*Parent Child Relationship; \*Parent Influence; Parent Participation; Parents as Teachers; Poverty  
IDENTIFIERS \*Family Strengths

## ABSTRACT

In contrast to research models that allude to the deficiencies of children whose parents are characterized as at-risk, this literature review focuses on the potential achievements of these children. The review attempts to heighten awareness of the efforts of researchers to provide a theoretical basis for advancing programs that foster a positive link between home and school; the review claims that research bolsters the idea that as their children's first teachers, all parents can prepare their children for successful academic achievement. The review discusses in detail several studies on low-income and at-risk parents' relationships with their children or adolescents and the effect of those relationships on the children's academic achievement. Studies reviewed include those investigating intervention programs or special factors associated with minority families. Examples of studies reviewed include Ira A. Gordon's Parent Education Project and the Verbal Interaction Project of Long Island, New York. The review concludes that effective families appear to exist and function in all socioeconomic and ethnic groups whose children are academically successful. The review includes several quotes designed to summarize and emphasize its contentions. (Contains 30 references.) (EV)

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## Parents in Poverty Provide Positive Influences For Their Children

### A Selected Literature Review

Frances Y. Lowden, Ph.D.

The pejorative research models in the past decades allude to myriad deficiencies of the children of parents characterized as at-risk. This article focuses on the potential achievements of these children which can positively impact how teachers, administrators, and decision makers and bridge what students of varying socioeconomic status receive from school versus what they should receive. As an attempt to strengthen the efforts of advocates for the poor and the homeless this literature can provide an awareness of efforts of researchers to provide a theoretical basis for advancing programs that provide a positive link between the home and the school. The home-school contextual continuum of learning is bolstered by research that concludes that as first teachers all parents can prepare their children for successful academic school achievement.

As widely supported in a voluminous body of literature, a strong learning environment that incorporated parents in the learning process has been shown to have a significant influence on students' achievement orientation (Clark, 1983; McAdoo, 1988). This success holds true across all social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Clark's (1983) assumption that "family intactness is not a necessary or sufficient condition for high quality learning in the home led him to select families that fit into one of four distinct groups:

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1. Two parent families with at least one high-achieving twelfth grade child.
2. One-parent families with at least one high-achieving twelfth grade child.
3. Two-parent families with at least one low-achieving twelfth grade child.
4. One-parent families with at least one low-achieving twelfth grade child.

The participants were ten black families who lived in an urban Chicago community. The families had an income on or below the poverty level and low educational levels.

The study used field methods (i.e. interviews, questionnaires, and observations of family interactions). The data were collected over a six month period of time using taped semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and an attitudinal questionnaire. The interviews were conducted with the aid of a specially developed outline that allowed for unencumbered inquiry into family unit functioning. The form and order of questions was not rigid. Questions were asked at the interviewers discretion. The three domains categorized were background information, home living patterns, and educational orientation. Instruments were constructed to measure family disposition toward education, family encouragement, family ego strength, level of ethnic particularism, family

integration and congruence, attitudes towards females and personality characteristics of family members.

The participant observation portion of the study was originally designed so that the researcher would actually live in these homes for two or three days consecutively. This goal was drawn from the words of Jules Henry (1971), who once argued that "direct observation of families in their native habitat, going about usual business could furnish new insights into family influences on child behavior" (p. 21). Evidence in this study highlights the necessity of strong parental involvement and encouragement of children. The findings indicate that there are far more commonalities than anomalies that exist between families with low incomes and low educational levels and families with two parents, a more substantial income, who live in better neighborhoods. The ethnographic nature of the study allowed for analysis of the family processes that interact which manifested as child rearing practices. The ability to have give-and-take communication, to have clear and consistent rules, to function in an environment that is nurturing and caring, and to be provided a safe, directed, and monitored family system appear to be consistent in all of the families.

In the summer of 1966, Ira A. Gordon began his Parent Education Project. The purpose of the program was to enhance the development of infants through weekly visits to their homes by parent

educators who taught mothers activities to carry out during the week with their infants. The program was designed to serve children from the age of three months to their third birthday. The seminal study was centered at the University of Florida at Gainesville. Contact was made with about 550 families in eleven surrounding counties during the entire time of the project. The purpose of this project was to investigate a way of early intervention into the lives of babies to break the poverty cycles. The project attempted to simultaneously raise the chance that the infant will reach a higher level of intellectual functioning and that the adult who mothers him will gain in competency and feelings of self-worth.

The Home Learning Center project, a component of the Parent Education Project, listed these specific goals in applying basic principles of early development in a real life home setting:

1. To sustain a combined home visit and home learning center approach, using paraprofessionals as the key educators of parents who would in turn teach their children.
2. To develop intellectual and personality stimulation materials that could easily be taught to the mother by paraprofessionals and that the mother could then teach her infant.
3. To investigate the continuing effects of such a program as the youngsters reached kindergarten and the beginning of school years.

Mothers in the original group were identified at their infant's birth

by the obstetrics staff. The criteria for inclusion were that the family was classified as indigent on the hospital records, there was no history of mental illness or retardation in the mother, and it was a single birth with neither breach or Caesarean delivery nor major complications to baby or mother. The original sample consisted of 397; 80% black. 20% white. The core of the treatment was a weekly home visit with the mother and her infant by a paraprofessional parent educator. Each parent educator was assigned ten families and visited the home once a week to teach the mother a learning activity. The children and mothers were evaluated both during and after the intervention phase of the program.

The broad aims of the investigation were to determine if parent education approaches to intervention into the lives of economically disadvantaged infants and their mothers would be feasible and if there were long-term positive effects on both mother and child. The summary of findings conclude that the cognitive and school performance data collected during the course of this project, such as IQ, achievement, and placement in special education classes, supported the hypothesis that those children in the program for two to three consecutive years performed better than control children for as long as seven years after the active intervention had ended. However, the socioeconomic and personality data relating to the mothers and their children, such as teacher ratings and inventories of personality variables, did not show such differences.

Levenstein, O'Hara, and Madden, conducted a study (1968) as a minimal intervention method to aid low income parents to enhance the early cognitive and emotional socialization of children in their families. The Verbal Interaction Project turned to the family as the primary resource and home base for its preschool Mother-Child Program.

The importance of the spontaneous interactive element of the mother-child relationship to the child's growth was stressed by Bronfenbrenner (1979): "In the early years of life the psychological development of the child is enhanced through his involvement in progressively more complex, enduring patterns of reciprocal, contingent interaction with persons with whom he has established a mutual and enduring attachment" (p. 26).

The Verbal Interaction Project is located in Nassau County, Long Island, New York. The basic sample selection were: (a) eligibility for low income housing, (b) residence in rented housing, (c) occupation less than skilled, (d) neither parent with an education above high school, and (e) child's testability in English.

Most participants were black, reflecting the over-representation in the poverty areas. The Mother-Child Home Program is based in the child's home, with twice-weekly, half-hour sessions over 2 school years. Usually the starting age is two. The number of sessions was geared to the mother's needs, with a maximum of 46 per year. Data were gathered

through quantitative and anecdotal methods. The findings indicate that in, the quasi-experimental data, reading and math achievement scores seem to be a linear function of the amount of treatment received, as had been at age 5. The available evidence suggested that advancement in school grades and teachers' judgment regarding the presence of severe academic problems were also related to MCHP participation. Lareau (1987) conducted a study that examined the formal requests from teachers and administrators asking parents to participate in schooling, particularly surrounding the issue of achievement. It also studied the quality of interaction between teachers and parents on the school site. Although there were some variations among the teachers in their utilization of parents in the classrooms, all promoted parental involvement and all believed there was a strong relationship between parental involvement (particularly reading to children) and academic performance. The research involved participant-observation of two first grade classrooms in two different communities. The participants came from a community of white working-class high school graduates or dropouts, employed in skilled or semiskilled occupations and periodically unemployed. Or they were selected from a community of white middle-class, college educated, professionals who had strong careers and were less effected by changes in the economy.

Teachers in both schools interpreted parental involvement as

reflection of the value parents placed on their children's academic success. The findings indicate that parents in both communities valued educational success; all wanted their children to do well in school, and all saw themselves as supporting and helping their children achieve success at school. Although the educational values of the two groups did not differ, the ways in which they promoted educational success did. In the working-class community, parents turned over the responsibility for education to the teacher. In the middle-class community, parents saw education as a shared enterprise and scrutinized, monitored, and supplemented the school experience of their children. The working-class had poor educational skills, relatively lower occupational prestige than teachers, and limited time and disposable income to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling. The middle class parents, on the other hand, had educational skills and occupational prestige that matched or surpassed that of teachers; they also had necessary income resources to manage the child care, transportation, and time required to meet with teachers, to hire tutors, and to become intensely involved in their children's schooling. Analyzing the role of cultural capital in structuring family-school relationships, particularly parent participation in education, provides a rich setting for analyzing the linkages between micro and macro levels of analysis.

Ford (1993) investigated family achievement orientation (that is, parental beliefs regarding education) as perceived by black early adolescents in an urban school district. She also examined the proposition that social, psychological, and cultural variables are directly linked to both gifted and nongifted black students' achievement orientation. The study was guided by two primary objectives: first, to explore the degree to which black students' perceptions of familial achievement orientation (as opposed to familial demographic variables) influence their orientation to achieve; and second, to elucidate the various determinants of achievement orientation (psychological, social, cultural, and familial) among early adolescent black students sampled in an urban environment.

The residents of the target community selected for this study were primarily of low SES (median income: approximately \$18,000). The city was nearly 100% Black. Most of the families received Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and their children received free or reduced-fee school lunches. The sample consisted of 148 fifth and sixth graders, who attended two elementary schools located in an urban school district in a midwestern state.

The sample included 59 males (40%) and 89 females (60%). Of these, 73 (49%) were fifth graders and 75 (51%) were sixth graders. The instrument used consisted of an educational and demographic section; social, psychological, and cultural scales; ideology and underachievement

scales. Students were interviewed individually during school hours by six interviewers trained by the researcher to administer the Self-Perception of School Achievement Survey. The findings indicate that family demographic variables contributed little to black students achievement orientation. Specifically, such variables as parents' level of education, occupation, employment status, and primary caregiver (including absence of father in the home) had little influence on level of support for social, cultural, and psychological variables held by the black students sampled. Moreover, these same demographic variables had little influence on the extent to which the black students supported the American achievement ideology. Research findings by black social scientists call for more substantive, and more relevant research on the strengths of black families, especially regarding the influence of parental achievement orientation on black students' achievement orientation, beliefs, and values.

There is growing awareness that in the light of new paradigms, with less emphasis on demographic variables at the expense of family values, beliefs, and attitudes, that research on the black family must move beyond ascribing a cultural-deficit or blame-the-victim perspective to study black families from a perspective that recognizes the diversity and validity of these families. Buri (1986) researched the effects of variables of parental nurturance, acceptance, encouragement, and support on college students. Research has shown these variables to be positively

correlated with children's self-esteem. This study investigated the effects of parental nurturance and the use of permissive, authoritarian, authoritative parental discipline, and self-esteem. The participants were 408 students from a coeducational liberal arts college in the upper Midwest. The responses of 55 students were not included because one of their parents died or because their parents were divorced or separated. The 355 students were asked to complete five questionnaires and one demographic information sheet. The findings indicate for all participants in the study, 37% of the variance in self-esteem was associated with parental nurturance; and for the female participants, this value was nearly 45%. The results of the study are correlational, and children do influence parental responses to them. But the fact that the results strongly support the findings of previous researchers who studied younger age groups suggests that causality in the study is in the direction of parental nurturance effecting self-esteem. The findings further substantiate the supposition that acceptance, approval, and support on the part of parents is significant in the development of self-esteem in children. The fact that the children in the study were well into adolescence (they were approximately 19 years old and nearly 2/3 of them were no longer living with their parents) suggests that this influence persists well beyond childhood.

Authoritative parenting seems to convey to the child the impression

that he/she is accepted, affirmed, and respected. Authoritarian parenting, with its emphasis upon obedience, forceful punishment, and the establishment of hard and fast rules in the family, tends to undermine in the child feelings of acceptance and support by the parents. What have been consistently treated as separate parenting variables (i.e., parental nurturance and parental discipline) may actually be closely linked together. The type of discipline exercised in the home being instrumental in the development of a child's sense of being accepted, supported, respected, and nurtured by his/her parents.

Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) conducted research on socialization of gender roles through participant observation with preadolescent children in and outside elementary schools. The research draws on data gathered by all three authors from 1987 to 1991. The children attended two public schools from predominately middle and upper-class neighborhoods (with a few from lower socioeconomic areas) in a large, mostly white university community. During the research the investigators played several roles: parent, friend, school aide, coach, volunteer, and carpooler. Some findings indicate that popular boys, especially in the upper grades were defiant of adult authority, challenged existing rules, and received more disciplinary actions than did boys in the other groups. They attained a great deal of peer status from this type of acting out. Boys who exhibited an air of nonchalance in the face of teacher authority

or disciplinary measures enhanced their status among their peers. Boys, even in the predominately white middle-class schools studies, were accorded popularity and respect for distancing themselves from deference to authority and investment in academic effort and for displaying traits, such as toughness, trouble-making, domination, coolness, and interpersonal bragging and sparring skills. Chubb and Fertman (1992) explored the differences between adolescents who have a sense of belonging in their families and adolescents who do not. Using six variables: self-esteem, locus of control, sense of belonging in school, sense of belonging in the community, time spent with family, and level of involvement in school and community activities were evaluated. Two hundred thirty-six ninth grade students from a junior high school participated in this study (average age 14.5). Ninety-five percent of the students were white; the majority of the remainder were African-American. Fifty-seven percent of the students were female; 43% were male.

The junior high school drew students from a small, working-class town, a middle-class suburban area, and a substantial rural area. A questionnaire that incorporated instruments developed by other researchers was used to assess students on the variables of interest to this study. Results from this study indicate that adolescents who feel that they belong in their families differ from adolescents who do not feel a sense of

belonging in their families. The need for peer acceptance does not replace the role of the family for an adolescent. The adolescent's world may expand to include peers, but the foundations for how the adolescent perceives and negotiates the world are laid within the context of the family. Kennedy (1992) conducted a study on the relationship of maternal beliefs and childrearing strategies to social competence in preschool children. The aim of the study was to determine whether maternal childrearing beliefs and strategies predict the child's social competence with peers. Fifty-two children were recruited for participation through two private day care centers via letters sent home to the parents. The preschool children ages 3 to 5 years (M: 50.85 months), enrolled full time in day care and their mothers participated in the study. Twenty-two of the children were boys and thirty were girls. The structured interview was designed to assess maternal attitudes and behaviors which would impact directly or indirectly on the social competence of her child. Interviews were arranged by phone, and most of the interviews took place in an unoccupied room at the child's day care center. The findings indicate that mothers highly valued social competence for their children. Mothers, whose children were rejected by peers, were less likely to teach their children about social skills, spent less time in child-centered activities, and used more punishment and less reasoning and explanation in discipline.

Shade (1981) sought to define a good portrait of the personality style or response pattern which black children have to develop to become competent in a white-oriented social system. On the basis of results obtained throughout the school district from the Research and Development Department in two urban centers, schools were selected whose overall student scores place the school in the 94th percentile ranking in math and reading and whose neighborhood population appeared to be middle class or above. Sixty black children were selected, thirty from the first grade and thirty from the third grade. They were randomly selected from two schools whose history and current performance indicators suggested a high level of competence by the majority of students. The Coan-Cattrell Early School Personality Questionnaire was chosen as the measuring instrument. The findings suggest that black middle-class children who get along in public schools and perform at an adequate level tend to be rather reserved and detached instead of affiliative and participating. This has been described as slight alienation. The black children were found to be obedient, accommodating, and basically conforming to the demands of authority. Conformity and adherence to authority was suggested as being peculiar to lower-class achievers. An examination of other traits suggest, at least for this group of black children, that perhaps the negative aspects of being conforming and submissive are offset by the children's ability to be

shrewd and manipulative of their environment. These children may have come to understand how to achieve their goals within the framework of certain expectations and still maintain their concept of self-determination.

Majoribanks (1984) examined the relationships social-psychological family environment measures and adolescent's aspiration. As other researchers have done, Majoribanks used Laosa's theoretical model where parent-child interactions are the mediating factor between school performance and social status. Data was collected from 100 Australian families. A follow-up study was done in 1982 involving half of the original families who had a 16 year old. Status groups based on occupation were (a) service, (b) intermediate (i.e., clerical artisans), and (c) working. Data was collected through a semistructured interview. The findings indicated that within each occupational category, educational aspirations more than occupational aspirations influenced the perceptions of the adolescents.

Ross (1987) conducted a study of the characteristics of the home environments of high achieving and low achieving fourth grade black male students from low income homes in a rural community. Using the Family Environment Scale, data was gathered by tape recorded interviews. The findings indicate that:

1. While there were more intact families in the low-achieving groups, there were more male adults and extended families in the high

achieving groups.

2. Parents of high achieving children discussed topics relating to education more often with their sons.

3. Parents of high achievers had greater expectations for the educational achievement of their sons.

4. High achieving students' parents were more likely to become involved in community and school activities.

The literature has shown a growing trend among researchers toward the use of a more holistic approach in the study of families. Effective families appear to exist and function in all socioeconomic and ethnic groups whose children are academically successful. While the research has addressed the potential and actual strengths of minority at-risk families the strengths of white at-risk families have usually addressed within the framework of broader studies which were investigating other questions (Holcombe, 1992). The following hypothesis suggested by Neisser (1986) offers new perspectives on the school achievements of minority children. The difficulties encountered by minority children as a group do not result from any intrinsic intellectual incompetence on their part as suggested in the research of the 1960s and 1970s, but from the conditions of their lives, from their membership in a caste and a culture, from the inadequacies of their schools and their teachers, from the stresses they encounter in the present and the barriers they expect to

encounter in the future. Thomas Kuhn (1970) observed "when recognized anomalies, whose characteristic feature is their stubborn refusal to be assimilated into existing paradigms, give rise to new theories which give identity to the anomalies, a paradigm shift or scientific revolution occurs" (p. ix). Recent black researchers believe, the demythologization of negative images about the black family is an ongoing process that will probably continue for generations (Clark, 1983; Ford, 1983; McAdoo & Neisser, 1989). Some researchers of lower-class families believe that parent-child identification is highly problematic. If that is so, it is due in no small measure to the lack of benefits, or resources, that the lower-class parents (black or white) are able to supply their children (Scanzoni, 1985).

Clark (1983) suggests that more appropriate instruments and methods are needed for studying the home environments and parenting practices of at-risk families.

### Conclusion

In summary, this literature review has broadly focused on areas that find impetus and emphasis in the following quotes:

My basic contention is that the family's main contribution to a child's success in school is made through parents' dispositions and interpersonal relationships with the child in the household. It is the family members' beliefs, activities, and overall cultural style, not the

family units' composition or social status, that produces the requisite mental structures for effective and desirable behavior during classroom lessons. (Clark, 1983, p. 1)

"(T)he families of successful students show great concern about the school's success with their students. Only with the input from the parent will the school provide sound training" (Dornbush & Wood, 1989, p. 86).

"(If) there is one thing that recent research has shown, it is that a child's education depends on what goes on in the child's life, not merely on what goes on in the child's school" (Coleman, 1988, p. 8).

"We, as a society, are selling short the majority of our children when we assume, incorrectly, that acquired and irrevocable, intellectual advantages and disadvantages fall within lines demarcated by class, ethnicity, and household structure" (Dornbush & Wood, 1989, p. 87).

The transmission of content to children is one of the family's most important functions. Content is conveyed in a wide variety of ways: conscious instruction, provision of role models, family communication patterns and dynamics, mediation of (and exposure to) external influences, and creation of a family climate. (Mintz, 1989, p. 111)

(P)arental participation in all schools, particularly low-income schools, is extremely important in this modern age when a level of

personal development is needed if students are to achieve well in school and when family and community support is not as strong as it used to be. (Comer, 1991, p. 188)

"Parents of achievers tend to be warm, accepting, supportive and, at the same time, demanding of a better than average performance from their children" (Shade, 1978, p. 86).

"It seems quite clear that educational stimulation and emotional support from parents are the central factors in differentiating children's education and development (Grothberg, 1979, p. 214).

All children are significantly shaped by what their families teach and what kind of environment their families create for learning.

Families play the central role in nurturing very young children, in shaping the character of older children, in inculcating the habits that make learning possible, and in choosing the specific knowledge valued by the specific family. (W)hen education is broadly conceived, families play the most important role. Parents are a child's first teachers, and families are their first, and most enduring school. (Weston, 1989 p. 2).

"It is more humane and cost-effective to prevent and combat the problems of black children before they occur or become serious and require costly remediation" (Edelman, 1985, pg. 81).

"Preventing problems before they begin and strengthening families and communities are concepts that reflect our current sociological view" (Kagan, 1989, p. 435).

"Our goal is to show the nation that preventive investment in kids has got to become the cornerstone of the American domestic policy" (Edelman, 1989, p. 121).

This selected review of literature has addressed topics relevant to the study of child-rearing practices of mothers of school-based competent, at-risk students which should result in prosocial policies that undergird parents in poverty.

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